

Lives of Performers

CHUCK KLEINHANS

Lives of Performers, directed by Yvonne Rainer. 1972, 95 min., b&w, 16mm. Distributed by Visual Resources, American Film Library, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036.

"*Lives of Performers* is about..." The statement cannot be completed, for the film does not rely on simple equation, on syllogistic logic, on cause-and-effect thought patterns. But it would be wrong to say that the film is "poetic," for that word connotes a certain looseness or ambiguity which would not do justice to the film's careful and precise thought. Nor could one say that the film was "personal" for it does not indulge in the private symbolism and meaning we associate with personal films; yet *Lives of Performers* is a profoundly personal film in the sense that each viewer will experience a very individual and unique response.

Let me start obliquely then, and say that *Lives of Performers* belongs generally within the direction of the contemporary arts which is concerned with constructing an art work that provides a complex matrix for the audience, and which therefore allows each viewer to have a unique experience of the art work. The film has limits, boundaries, but it is also immense; each viewing would elicit a different response from the same person. Many experimental or aesthetic films basically present a maze or a puzzle with only one way out, only one answer. Imagine a film that initially startles through exploiting one potential of cinema: say one edited as a continuous uninterrupted series of lap dissolves, or an experiment in the same pattern shifting from black to white or positive to negative. Such films, once the path is found, simply provide the same experience over and over with each viewing. For *Lives of Performers* we could use the metaphor of the labyrinth. There is an entrance, and an exit, but in between as one inexorably progresses in space/labyrinth (time/film), each viewer can move along various levels, side passages, parallel corridors, detours, and so forth:

To be descriptive: Yvonne Rainer, one of America's leading dancers/choreographers, founded the Judson Dance Workshop in New York eleven years ago. Her film shows dancers in practice, still and motion pictures of dance productions, and dancers as actors

playing out an elaborate and repetitive drama of interpersonal relations. Both the sound track and visual track serve to further, counterpoint, repeat with variations, interrupt, and comment on each other. Technically, the film is an elaborate exploration of basic dance elements generalized to the uniquely cinematographic: stasis vs. movement, silence vs. sound, black vs. white, life vs. art, flat vs. plastic, ritual vs. natural, natural vs. cultural.

Lives of Performers has three recurrent interrelated themes: performer/performance, human interrelationship, and cliché. It begins with dancers practicing exercises. Immediately we are presented with multiple identities or roles: (1) the "real person" we see, (2) the dancer, (3) the dancer as performer for other dancers (as performers), at the practice session, and (4) all of the preceding doubled by presence of the camera (they are performing for us) and (5) the presence of a tape recorder giving a non-sync-sound track of instructions and talk during the exercises. As the film progresses, the multiplication continues: the dancers are also (6) players in a drama, sometimes (6a) directly, seen playing roles on camera, sometimes (6b) as voices-over reading a script for the drama, or (6c) commenting voices-over on the visual track, or (6d) within the drama, taking the role of dancer. Plus (7) standing "outside," the dancers are sometimes (on the soundtrack) commenting on, through summary, laughter, or aside, any of the preceding. It is the hall of mirrors effect of films, plays within plays... a Pirandellian multiplication of identity.

But it is not done on the cheap; rather it all fits within an exploration of our lives as performances for others—performances in which we become trapped ourselves, unsure of when or how or if we can get out and be authentic, be who we really are. The film does not propose, finally, that we can get out, or even that it is desirable to do so, though it does show the agony of being within the situation. In this, it is not a pessimistic film, but rather stating for its maker, "what is."

Lives of Performers is (or can be, for a sympathetic viewer) an intensely personal experience, for an elaborate and multiple drama of human interaction runs parallel to the performer/performance theme. The film

is subtitled, "a melodrama"; the melodrama consists of re-enactments of (apparently) personal experiences from the dancers' lives. Thus one repeated and recurrent dramatic line has the situation of a married woman both attracted to and repelled by her husband, who is undecidedly going back and forth between her and another woman. The second woman, herself alternately attracted/repelled later establishes a relation to the first woman. Each of the three is indecisive, thus we have theme and variation, with mostly variation as relations and patterns are repeated again and again. Each performs for the other—that is the essence of relation—but by seeing the repetition, one can also see that for the most part all of these performances within relationships are clichés—basically inauthentic—and rely on clichés: verbal, physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual.

This complex multiplication is emphasized throughout by an implicit series of questions the film sets up. For example, the opening sequence of dance exercises, quite naturally shows a group of people doing the same repetitious physical actions, and then each one doing the same exercise with their own time/rhythm, producing an individual asymmetry within an overall symmetry. The implicit problem which grows in the viewer's mind is this: this is all repetition, and it is necessary for dancers to master technique, but at the same time, repetition can become cliché in interpersonal relationships. Is that inevitable? The melodramatic lines and actions re-emphasize this problem, for being clichés, they exert a powerful effect of engaging the viewer precisely because all of us act in repetitious/clichéd ways. The effect is to set up reverberations in the audience. Especially for anyone who is presently in or in the past has been in the situation of being one of a three-person sexual interrelationship and attempting to work out the complexities of the situation when it is not functioning to the satisfaction of all three. (Perhaps three is too narrow: two would do.) Of course the very fact of cliché and repetition gives psychotherapists material to work on, and it explains why one can see friends (having distance on them) either going through the same pattern again and again (with variation) or changing old patterns and growing into new ones. (Of course the inverse is that it is

damnably hard to see one's own patterns, being so close to them, and even harder to will a change of them.)

Thus the film's multiplicity. In one sequence of exercises, shot silent, a basic acting exercise is shown again and again:

A and B are seated talking in a room. C enters and shows the reaction of _____
A's reaction is _____; B's is _____

(A similar *cinematographic* exercise is to take the preceding and shoot it (1) as a single long take, (2) as a shot sequence, (3) with a static camera, (4) with a moving camera, (5 . . .) etc., etc.) We have in such a situation a multiplicity of relations and individual concepts of relations. Thus with A and B alone there is A's relation to B and B's relation to A. When C arrives the number of relations increases from two to six, plus we can then add what A thinks of the dual relation B-C, what B thinks of the dual relation A-C and what C thinks of the dual relation A-B. We can also add the reflection of each on the situation (e.g., what C thinks of the realization that B has a reaction to the dual relation A-C, etc. Actually the presence of a camera adds a silent voyeur, D, and further multiplication since the audience has all of the above relations/reactions available plus its own relation to each separate one.

These multiplications produce an effect that might be called "reverberation." Reverberation is then, the multiplicity of passageways and levels in the labyrinth of the film. And additional aesthetic effect is gained in the film through the interplay of form and content, which generally throughout the film oppose each other. To make a crude schema: (see page 54)

The embracing term for this crude set of oppositions is the concept of cliché. That is, through the film's positing of a series of oppositions, we learn, in an intuitive, not a directly rational way, the nature of clichés: filmic clichés, interpersonal clichés, artistic clichés, and "real life" clichés.

The reverberation effect allows the audience to examine clichés and to critique them, but in a unique way for each viewer. One's response is unconscious and conscious, emotional and intellectual; it is a response to



form and content and to the interplay of all the separate elements.

That said, the film might seem incredibly difficult to understand and experience, but it isn't. All of our minds perform such immensely complicated activities every day. This film transforms the complexity of everyday life into art, which makes it immensely easier to analyze the complex activities into parts. *Lives of Performers* is more deliberately complex than the average fictional narrative film. The latter, a Hollywood film, say, stands in a rather simple relationship to "life": it is mimetic, that is it imitates life, or is an artistic representation of it. This kind of film, as André Bazin was fond of saying, is a "window on the world." The fictional narrative film is especially appealing to audiences because of its apparent closeness to "life." Even when various deliberately "artistic" elements are added to the fictional variation, as in Bergman's *Persona* or Fellini's *8½* these especially aesthetic devices such as deliberate psychological symbolism do not so much deepen the work, but expand it horizontally through symbolism, ambiguity, irony, metaphorical elaboration, and so forth. These art films are, elaborating Bazin, "greenhouses on the world." In contrast, *Lives of Performers* chooses a different approach, which could be called self-reflective. Rather than seeking closeness to life, Rainer's film eschews the concept of mimesis and substitutes a critique of mimesis. In this, her film is like some of those of Jean-Marie Straub, such as *Othon*. We could say such films are blueprints for windows and greenhouses on the world.

An example of *Lives of Performers* as a

self-reflective statement is found in the introduction of the melodramatic situations. To a visual track of a still of a dance performance amid a table of papers, a script is read by several of the dancers. The script has several characters conversing, but the reading is extremely flat and especially irritating until we realize it is deliberate: we can also hear the readers turning the pages of their scripts. Finally, another voice gives a "natural" recall of the situation read. The effect is to make obvious the clichés of the script. The mimetic Hollywood film never betrays a consciousness of its verbal/behavioral clichés; in fact it does its best to hide them. Similarly, one could say that *Persona*, for all of its very consciously artistic construction, does not so much intend to expose verbal/behavioral clichés (or performances, we might call them) as to laterally elaborate them. You can analyze them yourself in viewing *Persona*, but the film itself does not require you to do so. *Lives of Performers* does require you to do so. This is not to say that Rainer is superior to Bergman; it is to say that they are distinctly different. *Lives of Performers* is highly conscious of its artistry, of its artificiality, of its assault on the easy "identification" demanded by more representational films.

It should not be assumed, however, that "more complex" is somehow aesthetically or politically better by its very nature. Consider a case in point from *Lives of Performers*. In one sequence a woman approaches a man to talk about their relationship. The sound-over summarizes her intentions, and adds, "She showed him her solo." Then in a single long take, this woman's solo dance is shown. It is exception-

form	sound and visual track	theme and variation
approximates	approximates	
content	melodramatic situations	uniqueness of interpersonal relations

ally well-performed and meaningful within the film's development to that point. (I hesitate to call it "expressive" because of the unique ambiguity of solo dance. Dance is a stylized presentation that uses the limits of the human body. Thus dance, given the inescapable concreteness of the dancer, has a limit on its abstractness, no matter how nonrepresentational it may be. Compare William Butler Yeats' question, how can you tell the dancer from the dance?) As the solo ends, the visual track cuts back to the couple close together and the voice-over says, "He said, 'Why did you show me that? I've seen it a hundred times before.'" (paraphrased from memory). This remark is both (1) probably true since they are both dancers within the same company, and (2) a cruel response to her attempt to give, to show, to perform for him. Within the film this much, and all the various individual reactions (the reverberation effect, above) can be experienced and understood. What cannot be understood from *within* the film is that the cruelty of his response is an example of male chauvinism. Granted, the phrase "male chauvinism" is overworked, imprecise . . . clichéd, as a term. But the term stands for an undeniable reality. Thus it is also a conceptual and liberating phrase. It is conceptual because it deals with more than specific (and perhaps ambiguous) cases, and it is liberating because it provides a larger understanding, a social and political understanding of life and one's relationship to it. (Similarly, a friend once remarked to me that she had always thought the phrase "American imperialism" was a piece of crude left sloganeering and propagandizing, until she learned, through anti-war activity, that indeed, there was such a thing as American imperialism.)

Lives of Performers is a fascinating film which is useful for study, for learning about film and about ourselves. It is especially useful for filmmakers and film students interested in breaking with older forms of film. (Caveat reuter: the film is not recommended for the general film club audiences unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to experimental film.) However, *Lives of Performers* implicitly shows that only when an explicit political view is at the basis of a film can the film function as a meta-commentary on the situations presented within it. As it is, *Lives of Performers* is a labyrinth, but what we

need, unless we are simply to be amused at wandering through it again and again (and through the complexities of our own lives in relation to others, our own performances), is a map of the labyrinth. I am reminded of the feminist critiques of psychotherapy and the slogan of the magazine *Rough Times* (formerly the *Radical Therapist*): "therapy means change, not adjustment." In the last analysis, *Lives of Performers* speaks of change, but only for individual change. And without social change as well, change of individuals is finally adjustment to an oppressive society.

